

A Black Vortex of Military Determinacy in Thai Politics: A Political Perspective Acquired via an Analysis of the New Bangkok International Airport Development Project (Suvarnabhumi International Airport)

Wantarnagon Marut*

タイ政治における軍部の決定力の暗過流

—バンコク・スワナブーム新国際空港開発プロジェクトの分析を通して—
マルット・ワントルナゴン*

Abstract

The research on the role of the military in Thai political process has been widely studied for a long time particularly after the Coup D'etat of Sarit Dhanarajata in 1958. Many of such research indicated that military influenced in the land's policy-making process and overall political process mostly during 1958 - 1973. After that period, the role of the military in Thai political process has markedly dwindled after the proclamation of the 1997 constitution, especially during the Thaksin Administration from 2001 to the beginning of 2006 when the Thai Rak Thai Party was in power. The military's role, according previous studies, almost was not significant in Thai Political process.

The aim of this study is to show that even the military was ousted from the country's political arena since 1973, their leverage in the land's policy-making process and overall political process—which has taken many forms depending on the diversity of the social milieux—cannot be underrated. The significance of this study is to bridge such a gap through a meticulous inquiry into the role of the military in the Thai political process and policy making, affecting the construction of the New Bangkok International Airport (Suvarnabhumi Airport) which began in 1960 and was officially completed in 2006.

The result of the study found that even if the military might disappear from the country's political stage in certain periods, their role and influence in the Thai political process were well preserved and could be exercised at will in diverse manners depending on the social context and the times.

The study of the Thai political process and the Thai policy formulation process via the construction of Suvarnabhumi Airport is capable of assisting us in discerning the fact that in Thai politics the role and influence of the military in the political process and the related decision-making process deserve more prominence than accorded in the results of the previous studies of the Thai political process in the past, which portrayed their gradual decline since 1973.

Therefore, the author's study is another form of academic endeavor undertaken to fill in the gaps extant in the studies of the military's role and influence in Thai politics. This form of research (much underrated by a large number of academias) places great stress on the military's role and influence in the political process in connection with policy determination in addition to the military's direct political role in the form of the orchestration of coups d'etat, which has proven to be the subject of interest of the political studies for many decades.

* Graduate School of Asia-Pacific Studies, Waseda University, Doctoral Degree Program;
早稲田大学大学院アジア太平洋研究科博士後期課程

Introduction

With regard to the studies into the role of the military in Thai politics during the past decades the number of such studies has markedly dwindled after the proclamation of the 1997 constitution¹, especially during the Thaksin Administration from 2001 to the beginning of 2006 when the Thai Rak Thai Party was in power. Under Thaksin the studies of the role of the military in the country's politics were given a low profile because of the sheer political dominance of the government with a broad capitalist base. At the time the ruling group's absolute influence was so well attested that no one expected that the military's direct interventions in the country's political process could be realized without much ado.² However, quite against the expectations of many Thai political scientists, the Thaksin government was ousted by the 19 September 2006 coup d'etat.³

A number of important academic works on the role of the military in Thai politics spanning various political ages in the past include Chai-Anan Samudavanija's work entitled "The Role of the Military in Thai Politics⁴ (1932-1977)", which reveals that since the 1932 Revolution the role of the military has gradually changed. Still, a coup d'etat has persistently remained instrumental in the military's occasional interventions in the country's ever-shifting political contexts.

Another notable academic work, dealing with the political interventions of the Thai military⁵ (the five coups in 1932, 1947, 1957, 1971, and 1976, respectively), belongs to Suchit Bunbongkarn. It shows that most of the underlying reasons behind the orchestrated coups were "conflicts of interest" such as budget cuts, organizational downsizing, low salary, unwarranted manipulations in terms of promotion or transference, etc. and that what served as the catalysts for the military's interventions involved the civilian governments' administrative failure, their decreasing right to stay in office, the collective strength of military organizations, etc.

In respect of Pracha Thepkasetkul's study: *The Political Interventions of the Thai Military: A Case Study of 23 February 1991 Coup D'etat*⁶, the findings indicate that the causes of the 1991 coup were the civilian government's corrupt behavior, its abuse of

1 Surachart Bamrungsuk, *The Military and Democracy in Thailand: From October 14th to the Present and the Future*, (Bangkok: Grek University Research and Textbook/Coursebook Publishing Center), 1998.

2 Charnvit Kasetsiri, "One decade of the Military and Thai Politics" in <http://www.charnvitkasetsiri.com>.

3 Kasian Tejapira, *Hard Dilemmas and Thorny Bushes: A Pathway to Democracy*, (Bangkok: Mathichon Publishing House), 2008

4 Chai-Anan Samudavanija, "The Role of the Military in Thai Politics: A Case Study of the Members of Parliament's Official Tenure (1932-1977)" in Kamala Sukkhanich and Wuttichai Moonsilp (ed.), *The Military and Politics: Comparative Studies*, (Bangkok: Saengrungrakpim Printing House), 1980.

5 Suchit Bunbongkarn, "The Political Interventions of the Thai Military" in *The Military and Politics: Comparative Studies*, (Bangkok: Saengrungrakpim Printing House), 1980.

6 Pracha Thepkasetkul, *The Political Intervention of the Thai Military: A Case Study of 23 February 1991 Coup d'etat*, Research Paper, Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat University, 1992.

executive power against civil and military officials, and its despotic control of the National Assembly. All of these things had purportedly forced the National Peace Keeping Council (NPKC) to seize power in 1991.

As for the study of Surachart Bamrungsuk entitled *The Military and Democracy: From October 14th to the Present and the Future*⁷, published in 1998, the author concludes that the military's opportunity for direct political intervention (coup d'e tat) has been considerably lessened. Their political role has shifted to backstage cabinet formation, coercive orchestration of government's change or seemingly passive, disinterested observation.

Apart from the aforementioned studies, several other studies of the military and Thai politics (i.e. Chalermkiat Phewnuan's *Political Viewpoints of the Thai Military* (1976-1992)⁸, Kamala Sukkhanich's *the Military and Thai Politics: The Relationships between the Military, the Civilians, Democracy and National Security*⁹, Noranit Setabutr's *Polity of Military Bureaucracy and the Development of Thai Politics*¹⁰, Sulak Sivaraksa's *the Military and Thai Politics*¹¹, Stephen Hoadley's *The Military in The Politics of Southeast Asia*¹², Moshe Lissad's *Military Roles in Modernization : Thailand and Burma*¹³) also place much greater emphasis on the military's direct political interventions or coups d'etat than on their maneuverings of policy formulation and development project decision making.

In view of the majority of related literature and political studies, the military's direct political interventions in the form of coups d'etat have obtained far more academic saliency than their other role in the country's overall political process or policy development schemes.

Nonetheless, there are academic works of another group of academias in the same field which specifically focus on the Thai political process. These works lead to the conclusion that the military played a key role in the Thai political process during certain periods, especially from 1957 to 1973, but after 1973 their role was overlooked and gradually replaced by other political agents/actors. In fact within the last decade there have been just few detailed and in-depth studies into the role of the military in the political process of Thailand¹⁴. (See more details in the following part)

7 Ibid, Surachart Bamrungsuk, 1998.

8 Chalermkiat Phewnuan, *Political Viewpoints of the Thai Military (1976-1992)*, (Bangkok: Phoochadkarn), 1992.

9 Kamala Sukkhanich (ed.), *The Military and Thai Politics: Relationships between the Military, the Civilians, Democracy and National Security*, (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Faculty of Political Science), 1990.

10 Noranit Setabutr, *The Polity of Military Bureaucracy and the Development of Thai Politics*, (Bangkok: Nangsue Siam), 1978.

11 Sulak Sivaraksa, *The Military and Thai Politics*, (Bangkok: Yuwavitaya), 1987.

12 Hoadley J, Stephen, *The Military in The Politics of Southeast Asia*, (Cambridge : Schenkman Pub), 1975.

13 Lissad, Moshe, *Military Roles in Modernization : Thailand and Burma*, (Beverly Hills : Sage Pub), 1976.

Since the research on the role of the military in Thai politics proves to be lacking in this dimension, the significance of this study is to bridge such a gap through a meticulous inquiry into the role of the military in the Thai political process and policy making, affecting the construction of the New Bangkok International Airport (Suvarnabhumi Airport) which began in 1960 and was officially completed in 2006.

The contribution which this study wishes to make towards the investigation of Thai politics is to systematically reveal that despite the military's occasional disappearance from the country's political arena, their leverage in the land's policy-making process and overall political process—which has taken many forms depending on the diversity of the social milieu—cannot be underrated. The results of this study may differ from or prove to be incompatible with the results of its precedents in certain political ages, since the study encompasses a long period of almost fifty years of Suvarnabhumi Airport construction and particularly raises a question about the role of the military in the Thai political process and policy-making process as mirrored through their involvements in the Suvarnabhumi Airport development project.

The following question relating to the study which may be of interest is why the Suvarnabhumi development project was selected to reflect the overall picture of the political process in Thailand. As a matter of fact, there are three reasons behind the choice:

- 1) The project is one of the country's most time-consuming development projects, for it spanned the period of nearly fifty years (1960–2006). Such a time span is considered long enough to give a true picture of Thailand's political development, which is composed of different ages from the distant past to the present, e.g. the Age of Military Dictatorship, the Age of the Civilian Government with Close Affiliations with the Military, the Age of Democratically Elected Government, etc. The coexistence of the political development of interest with the development of the Suvarnabhumi Airport construction project enables them to mirror each other efficiently.

- 2) The project involved the widest range of political actors, including the military, political parties, politicians, governmental agencies, private companies, international organizations, foreign governments, the general public, non-governmental organizations, the mass media, students, academics, professional associations, or even the institution of kingship. Such variety is likely to securely/safely reflect all of the facets of the Thai political process.

- 3) The project is one of the most costly development projects ever conceived in Thailand. According to the New Bangkok International Airport Company's reports, the total investment whose source ranged from the government's, state enterprises', private

14 Ibid, Charnvit Kasetsiri.

companies' funds to a considerable amount of monetary loan from abroad amounted to 155,000 million baht.¹⁵

Such a project which entailed an immense investment of money would inevitably affect the country's public policy-making process.

In order to answer the study's set-up question, the content of the study is divided into manageable parts:

1. The Development of Studies of the Thai Political Process and a Study of the Thai Political Process via Suvarnabhumi Airport Development Project.

This part will review the related literature so as to exemplify the methodologies in use in the past and their emphasis (Has the emphasis been put on the military, the bureaucracy, the politicians, or the political capitalists, etc.?). Furthermore, the preceding studies will be compared with the author's research to enhance our perception of the Thai political process—to see that the political studies in the past attached too little importance to the research into the role of the military in the Thai political process, especially since 1973.

2. The Thai Political Process in the Construction of Suvarnabhumi Airport: The Conception Period (1960 - 1973)

This part will explain the political process reflected in the formulation of the initial construction policy of the new international airport. The seminal ideas, their background and progress will be canvassed to show that the political process in relation to the development project was completely subjected to the military and the bureaucracy's control to the point that the other sectors of the society rarely had an opportunity to participate in the project initiation.

3. The Thai Political Process in the Construction of Suvarnabhumi Airport: The Period of Policy Change (1974 - 1980)

This part will expound on the political process involved in the construction of Suvarnabhumi Airport at the time when other social sectors, especially democratically elected politicians, gained more significant role after the 1973 pro-democracy uprising on October 14th. Nevertheless, greater equality in terms of political opportunity for other political actors could not significantly interfere with the military's influence on the project's decision making and the country's entire political process.

4. The Thai Political Process in the Construction of Suvarnabhumi Airport: The Approval and Initial Construction Period (1991 - 2000)

This part will provide an explanation about the political process during the time when politicians', political capitalists' and lobbyists' political role were more developed.

15 The New Bangkok International Airport Company Ltd. annual reports (the year 2006), pamphlets and leaflets for information dissemination before the official opening of Suvarnabhumi Airport on September 29th, 2006.

Still, the military's political influence remained unchallengeable as exemplified in the case of the National Peace Keeping Council's sway over the project's decision making process or the cases in which conflicts of interest forced the military to confront and suppress virtually all forms of opposition or rivalry from the democratically-elected government.

5. The Thai Political Process in the Construction of Suvarnnabhumi Airport: The Subsequent Construction and Official Opening Period (2001 - 2007)

This part will offer an exposition of the political process at the time when the military's control and interests were most impacted. The infliction was so great that the military could no longer endure. Consequently, the democratic government was overthrown so that the military could resume their exercise of power and again directly exert their control over the airport's policy making after subsisting under the spell of political recession for some time.

I. The Development of the Studies of the Thai Political Process and a Study of the Thai Political Process via Suvarnnabhumi Airport Construction Project

The objective of the explanation in this part is to provide the reader with relevant background so that the methodologies, the subject matters and the academic slants of the previous studies will be adequately clarified.

In addition, in order to enable us to better comprehend Thailand's past political process, we need a detailed comparison between this study and its precedents to show what has been left out. For instance, the sidelining of the role and influence of the military in the country's political process seems to be in practice since 1973.

The approach discussed above will help us to understand that the studies of the Thai political process in the past have placed too little stress on the role of the military in Thai politics since 1973.

To fulfill the aim of the study as elaborated, the author will divide the studies of Thai political process in the past into four ages (from 1957 to 2007--the period was chosen because it corresponds with the time when the development of Suvarnnabhumi Airport construction project took its course). The Ages are listed as follows: 1) the studies of the Thai political process from 1957 to 1973 2) the studies from 1973 to 1988 3) the studies from 1988 to 2001 and 4) the studies from 2001 to the 2007 coup d'état.

The division of the Thai political process mentioned above is congruent with the division employed in the author's study of the Thai political process via Suvarnnabhumi Airport development project, which comprises four distinct periods: 1) the Conception Period (1960-1973), 2) the Policy Change Period (1974-1990), 3) the Approval and Initial Construction Period (1991-2000) and 4) the Subsequent Construction and Official Opening Period (2001-2007).

The Comparison of the Development of the Studies of Thai Political Process with the
Development of the Suvarnnabhumi Airport Construction Project

Development of the Studies of Thai Political Process	Development of Suvarnnabhumi Airport Construction Project
The First Age (1957-1973)	The Conception Period (1960-1973)
The Second Age (1974-1988)	The Policy Change Period (1974-1990)
The Third Age (1988-2001)	The Approval and Initial Construction Period (1991-2000)
The Fourth Age (2001-2007)	The Subsequent Construction and Official Opening Period (2001-2007)

With reference to the table above the Thai political process's course of development approximates that of the Suvarnnabhumi Airport construction project; therefore, we can use the results of the analysis of Thailand's political process via Suvarnnabhumi Airport construction for comparison. The emerging clearer picture obtained will exhibit the extent to which the studies of Thai political process conducted in the past gave weight to the role of the military in Thai politics.

The research into the Thai political process from 1957 to 1973 or the so-called Age of Military Dictatorship revealed that the military and the bureaucracy presided over the state policy making mechanism as summarized in Fred Riggs' *Thailand: The Modernization of a Bureaucratic Polity*. In respect of Riggs' work, Thai politics was dominated by bureaucratic polity in which the overall political process or public policy making process fell into the clutches of the military-led bureaucracy whilst the other social sectors were severely marginalized¹⁶ (Riggs's study focuses on Field-Marshal Sarit Dhanarajata Administration). In Thak Chaloemtiarana's work: *Thailand: The Politics of Despotic Paternalism*, whose line was similar to Riggs', the predominant role of the military was underscored. He pointed out that during the period the political echelons consisted of three levels: the government, the bureaucracy and the people. While the government acted as the society's leader or the "Phor Khun" (or "The Patriarch") and major public policy maker, the bureaucracy served as policy implementer. As for the people or the "Look" (meaning "children"), they were assigned the passive role of the followers or obedient offspring¹⁷. Other academic works such as Chai-Anan Samudavanija's¹⁸, Likhit Dhiravegin's¹⁹, Suchit Bunbongkarn's²⁰, Noranit

16 Fred Riggs, *Thailand : The Modernization of a Bureaucratic Polity*, (Honolulu : East-West Center, 1966)

17 Thak Chaloemtiarana (author), Phunnee Chatpolrak, M.R. Prakaithong Sirisuk and Thamrongsak Petchlertanandh (trans), *The Politics of Despotic Paternalism*, (2nd ed.) (Bangkok: Social Science and Humanities Textbook Foundation), 2005.

18 Chai-Anan Samudavanija, "The Future of Thai Politics and the Role of the Military" in *Politics* (Bangkok: Bannakit, 1977)

19 Likhit Dhiravegin, "National Policy and Thai Political Leaders", in Saithip Sukatiphan (ed.), *The Question of Leadership and National Policy-Making Process*, (Bangkok: Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat University), 1990, pp. 45-47.

Setabutr's²¹, Saneh Chammarik's²², Yos Santasombat's²³, etc., made a similar claim that Thai politics at the time was practically the bureaucratic polity in the shadow of military despotism.

If we carefully consider Suvarnnabhumi Airport construction process during the time (1960–1973), we will find out that the political process involved in the construction of the airport does not differ from the country's political process ascertained through the prove of the former political research. Similarly, the military were believed to play an important role in the formulation of the airport's construction policy with plenty of support from the bureaucracy, which the author will elaborate on in the latter part.

Concerning the political studies in the second age (1973–1988), it was witnessed that the majority of such studies began to document signs of more political struggles and challenge to the bureaucratic polity formerly described in Riggs' study. For example, in the work of Montri Chenvidyakarn, Thailand's politics was regarded as the polity of state corporatism or the limited pluralist polity more than the bureaucratic one after the October 1973 incident. Montri Chenvidyakarn explained that business groups, trade associations and the chambers of commerce had entered politics and exercised more influence on national policy making. The military and the bureaucracy were no longer the sole prime movers of state policies. Still, the business groups' role was severely limited and controlled by the government. Other academic works that were partially in line with Montri's study are Anek Laothamathas's²⁴, Narong Petprasert's²⁵, Patcharee Siroros's²⁶. In these authors' opinions the bureaucracy's monopolistic control of the Thai political process had ended whereas the political role of trade associations and chambers of commerce significantly increased as concisely captured by the term "Liberal Corporatism", which gained currency in Anek Laothamathas's writing.

Regarding the study of the political process in connection with the construction

20 Suchit Bunbongkarn, *The Development of Thai Politics: Interactions between the Military, Political Institutions and the People's Participation*, (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Publishing House), 1999.

21 Noranit Setabutr, "Conceptions of the Military's Role and the Development of Politics", in Nakharin Mektrairat (ed.), *Political Science - Politics*, (Bangkok: Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat University), 1999.

22 Saneh Chamarik, "Thai Politics and October Coup d'etat", in Nakharin Mektrairat (ed.), *Political Science - Politics*, (Bangkok: Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat University), 1999.

23 Yos Santasombat, *Power, Personality and Thai Political Leaders*, (Bangkok: The Institute of Thai Studies, Thammasat University), 1990.

24 Anek Laothamathas, *Look at Thai Economy and Politics through Business Groups' Activities*, (Bangkok: Kobfai), 1996.

25 Narong Petprasert, *Trade Associations and Chambers of Commerce in Thailand*, Master Degree Thesis, in the field of public administration, (Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat University), 1975.

26 Patcharee Siroros, *The Politics of Policy Patterning/Policy Making Procedure: A Case Study of Policies on the Thai Automobile Manufacturing Industry*, (Bangkok: Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat University), 1995.

of Suvarnnabhumi Airport in the corresponding period (from 1974 to 1990), the results contradict the aforementioned studies by showing that other political agents, the politicians in particular, had assumed the more influential role in politics, but their power was not enough to effect changes in public policies—the military's role and leverage was by no means substantially undermined by the fledgling political actors; however, their role shifted from direct interventions to other forms of manipulations, e.g. giving interviews to the mass media, obstructing the airport's construction process, helping their political advocates to hold/fill ministerial positions on the cabinet, etc. Further details will be given later.

The studies of Thai politics in the third age (1988–2001) viewed Thai politics differently: It was believed that during this time full-grown capitalist politics began to take root in the land; politicians and lobbyists were politically more influential than the military (except for the short period from 1991 to 1992 when the National Peace Keeping Council toppled the civilian government and took over the country's reins). A large number of businessmen entered politics via a political mechanism called “A General Election” or in other words, “the Premier must come from a truly democratic election”. Political works related to this age, considered influential in the field, include Anek Laothamathas's²⁷, Rangsun Thanapornphun's²⁸, or Yoshifumi Tamada's, which demonstrated the fact that the role of the military had shrunk after the May 1992 political unrest²⁹.

Nevertheless, the study of the Thai political process via the Suvarnnabhumi Airport development project of the author shows that since 1992 even though the military had withdrawn from Thailand's political arena, their role and leverage was maintained to so great an extent by means of concealed maneuvering of the construction policy through the bureaucracy's connivance that the politicians could not easily meddle with their schemes/wills.

The studies of the Thai political process in the fourth age covered the national politics just after the Thais Rak Thais Party (TRT)'s rise to power in 2001, which was a totally new political phenomenon, and ended with the 2006 coup d'état. In accordance with the following studies (e.g. Pasuk Phongpaichit's³⁰ Rangsun Thanapornphun's³¹,

27 Anek Laothamathas, *Mobile Phone Mobs: The Middle Class, Businessmen and Democratic Development*, (Bangkok: Matichon Publishing House), 1993.

28 Rangsun Thanapornphun, *Economic Policy Making Process under the 1997 Constitution of Thailand*, (Academic Paper No. 602, Faculty of Economics, Thammasat University), 2001.

29 Yoshifumi TAMADA, *Myths and Realities The Democratization of Thai Politics*, (Kyoto : Kyoto University Press), 2008.

30 Pasuk Phongpaichit, “Democracy, the People's Rights and Morality”, in Chirmsak Pinthong (ed.), *Outwit Thaksin*, (Bangkok: Khor Kit Duay Khon Publishing House), 2004

31 Rangsun Thanapornphun, *From Thaksinomics to Thaksinocracy*, (Bangkok: Openbooks), 2005. and *The Constitution and Economics: An Analysis of the 1997 Constitution (Vol. 1)*, (Bangkok: Mathichon Publishing

Kasian Tejapira's³², Kasem Sirisumpandh's³³, Terayuth Boonmee's³⁴, Witayakorn Chiengkul's³⁵, etc.) the TRT Party's legendary political success allegedly resulted from the enforcement of the 1997 constitution and that within this time a single group of political capitalists held a monopoly on Thailand's politics and secured intimate connections with few business groups via a large, predominant political party. Such observations noticeably contrasted with the descriptions of the past politics wherein businessmen and local capitalists equally participated in political activities and developed "symbiotic" relationships with each other. In fact no capitalist groups could monopolize the country's political process in previous political ages. The cited academics practically belittled the role of the military in the Thai political process due to the country's political situations in which the political capitalist government had dominated Thailand's political process to a degree that no one expected that the military would be able to reclaim their political power easily and openly.³⁶

According to the parallel study of the Thai political process via the Suvarnnabhumi Airport construction project, the results of the examination reveal that although the role of the military during this age was minimal, the military remained politically active within the politicians' consent. But in spite of the military's partial submission, the growing conflicts of interest between the rulers (the politicians) and the ruled (the military) had eventually led to another coup staged for the sake of the military's power reclamation.

In summary, this part's preliminary aim is to supply the reader with pertinent political background or rather to assist him in perceiving that after the political studies in the first age (1957–1973) in which researchers placed tremendous emphasis on the roles of the military and the bureaucracy in Thailand's political process, the roles of the military and the bureaucracy became academically less prominent in the succeeding studies; (actually during some ages, there was an all-pervasive paucity of research into their roles) whilst its primary aim is to compare the studies in the past with the author's analysis of the Thai political process via the Suvarnnabhumi Airport development project so as to unveil their weaknesses.

Under close scrutiny the research of the Thai political process via

House), 2003 and *Thaksinomics: Under Thaksinocracy*, Inaugural speech given on the appointment of emeritus professor in the field of social science, Thammasat University, 2003, on 12 January 2005.

32 Kasian Tejapira, "Thaksinocracy" in *Fah Diew Kun (Under the Same Sky)* (January–March, 2004)

33 Kasem Sirisumpandh, "Thaksin and Democracy in Political Party System", in Chirmsak Pinthong (ed.), *Outwit Thaksin*, (Bangkok: Khor Kid Duay Khon Publishing House), 2004.

34 Terayuth Boonmee, "Thaksinocracy", in Chirmsak Pinthong (ed.), *Outwit Thaksin*, (Bangkok: Khor Kid Duay Khon), 2004.

35 Witayakorn Chiengkul, *Economic Policy: Conflicts of Economic Interest*, (Bangkok: A.P. Graphic Design and Publishing), 2006.

36 Ibid, Chanwit Kasetsiri.

Suvarnnabhumi Airport construction project indicates that the roles of the military and the bureaucracy have not been significantly minimized over time: Despite the fact that during certain ages the military were not in the political limelight, their influence on policy development process and the overall political process of Thailand has been retained and expediently exercised through other channels, depending on the temporal and social conditions. In conclusion, it is rather tenable to state that the studies of the country's political process in the past decades have attached too little importance to the role of the military in the Thai political process most especially since 1973 and that such a stance and practice substantially restrict our ultimate understanding of Thailand's political process and phenomenon.

II. The Thai Political Process in the Construction of Suvarnnabhumi Airport: The Conception Period (1960 - 1973)

This part will show that the political process in connection with the construction of Suvarnnabhumi Airport in the conception period (1960-1973) was under the absolute control and influence of the military and the bureaucracy and that the other social sectors' roles were minimized to a large extent, and provide further details concerning the conception of Suvarnnabhumi Airport construction project, its political backdrop and development. The results of the examination on this part definitely conform to the political model established by the forgoing studies of this age (1957-1973). The full details are as follows:

The idea of the construction of the New Bangkok International Airport was conceived in 1960 under the autocratic regime of Field Marshal Sarit Dhanarajata. At the time the military played a prominent role in governing the country and were at the top of the power hierarchy; in cooperation with the high-level bureaucratic technocrats, the military solely laid out all the state policies.

In fact, a group of senior-ranking military officials and henchmen that had close ties with Field Marshal Sarit had managed to obtain several ministerial positions of great significance: Gen. Thanom Kittikachorn was appointed as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense; Lt. Gen. Prapas Jarusathien, as Minister of Interior; Maj.Gen. Phrachaoworawongthoe Krommamuen Narathipongprapan, as Deputy Prime Minister; and Maj.Gen. Pong Punnakan (who was Field Marshal Sarit's protégé),³⁷ as Minister of

³⁷ Lt.Gen. Pong Punnakan had been entrusted with the task of overseeing the Ministry of Transport since the 1958 coup d'etat. Before that he was a Deputy Director-General of the Department of Transport, Ministry of Transport, whereas Maj.Gen. Kanchit Khittasangkha (Field Marshal Plaek Pibulsonggram's younger brother) was the Director-General.

Dr. Gun Nagamati, former Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Interior, told the author in an interview on October 4th, 2008 that Field Marshal Sarit's selection of Lt.Gen Pong to take charge of the Ministry of Transport, thereby directly controlling the activities of Maj.Gen. Keetasangka, was politically-related.

Transport, (the Ministry of Transport was directly in charge of the building of the new civilian/commercial airport).

Under Sarit's rule the Ministry of Interior hired Litchfield Whiting Browne and Associates (an American company under the sponsorship of the United States Operations Mission to Thailand (USOM)) to take care of town planning of Bangkok. According to the results of the company's study, Thailand had to separate civilian airports from military airports (at that time Don Muang Airport served double purposes, both commercial and military services). Therefore, the construction of a new civilian airport was strongly recommended. It was said that the study had been used by the government as a pretext for commencing the legend of the longest construction project in Thailand.

In spite of Litchfield Whiting Browne and Associates' recommendation, town planning specialists like Dr. Thongchai Roachanakanan³⁸ observe that the origin of the project was highly suspect: Specifically, the junta might have deliberately distorted the results of the study by simply omitting the applicable time frame—in the report, the company suggested that “in the distant future” the civilian airports in Thailand be separated from the military airports. The government's emphasizing the necessity for the separation of different types of airport without mentioning the temporal condition³⁹ and its propagating the twisted account of the study to the general public were just part of the justification process for the project's initiation and the source of the conception of the second Bangkok International Airport construction at the end.

As for the progress of the airport's construction, much advancement was achieved during the Sarit Administration: There were submitted proposals of more than ten Thai as well as foreign companies⁴⁰ under the government's consideration. The administration, Field Marshal Sarit in particular, however, chose to negotiate with only one company, the Ital Thai Industrial of the Karnasuta Family⁴¹, giving a suc-

Lt.Gen Pong was a leading figure who propelled the construction of the New Bangkok International Airport especially from 1961 to 1973; he was the Minister of Transport with the ever-longest office tenure since the 1932 Revolution. Moreover, he used to be the Minister of Industry during the Sarit and Thanom governments.

38 Dr. Thongchai Roachanakanan is currently the director of the Earthquake Surveillance and Research Center, Ministry of Interior; he also works as an architect (level 8) at the Department of Public Works and Town & Country Planning, Ministry of Interior. His Ph.D. dissertation entitled *Bangkok and the Second Bangkok International Airport : Politics of Planning and Development* (Australian National University, 1999.) is widely regarded as one of the best research papers on the history of the construction of Nong Ngu Hao Airport during the pioneering period.

39 As seen in the news coverage of many newspapers at that time (e.g. the Siam Rath, 16 November 1961 issue, the Siang Chao Thai, 5 November 1961 issue, the Pim Thai, 25 September 1961 issue, etc.) which asserted that Thailand needed a new airport.

40 See the list of the ten companies in Pojana Simasathien, “Suvannabhummi Airport” in *Four Decades of the Department of Air Transport*, Air Transport Department, (Bangkok: Air Transport Department), 2004.

41 The business of the Karnasuta Family (Dr.Chaijudh's line) and Ital Thai diversified into four major business groups: Namely, the construction group (4 affiliated companies), the industry group (8 companies),

cinct explanation that "Ital Thai Industrial Company proposed the best terms and conditions for the government"⁴². Time had passed until the date for the signing of the construction contract was set amidst questions raised by the problematically disqualified companies. The bureaucracy led by the Ministry of Transport, the Budget Bureau, the Council for the National Economic Development (the council was later renamed the National Economic and Social Development Board), and the Department of Technical and Economic Cooperation, among others, had still lent the government full support for its decision.

From the study of the researcher, the acquired information points out that the Ital Thai Company had close affiliations with members of high rank in the Sarit government as revealed by the study of Sungsidh Piriyaarangsarn: In accordance with Sungsidh's study, a large number of business enterprises were under the patronage of the Sarit or Si Sao Deves Clique:

"In its heyday, the Si Sao Deves Group's influence spread over virtually all the businessmen in finance, industry, and commerce; the companies owned by the merchants relying on this military clique's protection were, for instance, Laemthong Bank, Thai Thanu Bank, Bangkok Metropolitan Bank, Klang Sin Ka Maenam Insurance Company, Nakorn Luang Insurance Company and so on..."⁴³ Jamru Company was also included on the long list."

Jamru Company Ltd. formed a close association between Ital Thai Industrial Company Ltd. of the Karnasuta Family and high-level figures in the military government and thus secured its profit and business protection. To begin with, the Jamru Company was founded by the Karnasuta Family, and its chief objective was to act as a selling agent for the Italian Fiat automobiles along with their counterparts from the U.S. and French manufacturers. With several forms of help/assistance from highly powerful officials its business objective was finally accomplished, so in return for its success, the company gave some of its shares to the officials. The leading politician and military officer who had received the shares was: Lt.Gen Prapas Jarusathien, the Minister of Interior and Commander of the First Region Army (the most important

the trading group (3 companies) and the hotel and property (13 companies) or 28 companies in sum total. See more details in Phuvadej Sinpongporn (compiler) and Chaiyudh Karnasuta, "the Fifth Richest Businessman: Dr. Chaiyudh Karnasuta", *The Twelve Richest Business Families in Thailand*, (Bangkok: Good Morning Publishing House), 2004, pp. 166-197.

42 Official Document No. KK. 11286/2505, the Secretariat of the Cabinet, The Construction of the New Civilian Airport, 21 September 1962.

43 Sungsidh Piriyaarangsarn, *Capitalism and Thai Bureaucrats* (1932-1960), (Bangkok: The Institute of Social Study, Chulalongkorn University), 1983, p. 253.

army in the metropolitan area); he was one of Field Marshal Sarit's outstanding followers and commanded a considerable amount of political leverage during the time. Gen. Prapas' previous positions were Minister of Interior and Deputy Prime Minister during the Poj Sarasin and Thanom Kittikachorn Administrations. Intimate relationships between Field Marshal Sarit and Gen. Prapas were well-known at that time as shown in Field Marshal Sarit's resignation as Field Marshal P. Pibulsongkram's Minister of Defense to express his disapproval of Field Marshal Plaek's political stance. Field Marshal Sarit's four inferiors who followed his lead included Lt.Gen. Thanom Kittikachorn, Maj.Gen Siri Siriyothin, AM. Chalermkiat Watanagul, and Lt.Gen. Prapas Jarusathien.

The connection between Field Marshal Sarit and Dr. Chaijudh Karnasuta, President of Ital Thai Industrial Company, had been repeatedly confirmed as in the interview with a former high-ranking civil official of the Ministry of Transport, whose name could not be revealed, who noted that "Sarit got the money while Ital Thai got the job."⁴⁴

In addition, in the book: *The Legends of Thirty Richest, and Best-Known Business Families* by Thanawat Sappaibul, who has studied the history of the Thai business families for a long time⁴⁵, the author makes a comment on the tightly-knitted relationships between the military government at the time and Ital Thai Company and says that a good business tie between Dr. Chaiyudh and the military regime during Ital Thai's founding period (1958) enabled the Ital Thai Group to grow rapidly and eventually become one of the wealthiest families in Thailand in just a few years⁴⁶.

Owing to such good relationships between the figures of high rank in the government and Ital Thai Company, Ital Thai Company received preferential treatment both in terms of contract award and monetary guarantee for the fulfillment of contract requirements.

Notwithstanding all the contributing factors, the development project came to a halt when Field Marshal Sarit died on December 8th, 1963 and the succeeding Thanom Kittikachorn government decided to shelve the project (30 December 1963 Cabinet Decision) because of budget constraints.

The author's findings prove to be compatible with the observations of Dr.

44 Interview, at a house on Sukhumvit Road, on October 5th, 2008, c. 10.00 a.m. -12.30 a.m.

45 Thanawat Sappaibul wrote several books on the history of rich businessmen and billionaires in Thailand; the subjects under his in-depth investigation are famous and respectable business families in the Thai society such as the Sophonpanich family (*Thirty Strategies of Chin Sophonpanich*), the Jiaravanont family (*Thanin Jiaravanont: A Leading Personality in the World of Business*), the Lamsam Family, (*The Ark of Life: Sino-Thai Business Tycoons of the Lamsam Family*) etc.

46 Thanawat Sappaibul, *The Legends of Thirty Richest and Best-Known Families*, (Bangkok: Animate Group), 2006.

Thongchai and a number of former senior-ranking civil servants in the Ministry of Transport in that the root cause of Field Marshal Sarit's distortion of Litchfield Whiting Browne and Associates' study was an immense amount of monetary benefits both from land reclamation and from the private construction company winning the contract. To put it another way, the New Bangkok Airport development project owed its existence to the military's interests during the despotic age in which the bureaucracy was an important administrative mechanism of the regime and duly performed its duties in response to the demands of the despot and his close associates.

After Field Marshal Sarit's decease, the project began to lose its momentum on account of budgetary problems. However, Lt.Gen Pong Punnan, the Minister of Transport whose term of office was the longest in the history of Thai democracy, had tried to become the driving force behind the project in behalf of the deceased premier (Field Marshal Sarit). Preliminary preparations started with the declaration of land reclamation from 1962 until 1972. Ten thousand rais of land was purchased or expropriated in the process; the land plot was considered the largest piece of land most adjacent to the capital. Thereafter, it was found that Khunying Sa-ard Punnan, Lt.Gen Pong Punnan's wife, had obtained the ownership of a plot of land slated to be reclaimed by the state and subsequently made a profit of one million baht on the sale. In regard to the alleged profits, Lt.Gen Pong, later, gave an interview to the media, admitting that Khunying Sa-ard was involved in the Nong Ngu Hao land speculation.⁴⁷

It can be said that the project's progress occurred during the military governments with full technical and administrative support from the bureaucrats. The prevailing policy at this time was "Policies are above reason and other things,"⁴⁸ according to Lt.Gen Pong's memorable saying. In other words, the bureaucracy was obliged to comply with the government's decrees despite the problem of conflicts of interest (personal vs. public).

The project's advancement was further achieved when Northrop Company (a U.S. consortium) applied for the new airport's construction concession from the Thai government on condition that the state had to let the company manage and reap all the profits from the airport for twenty years in exchange for construction costs.

Northrop's proposal won wide approbation from the military government under Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn, which just unseated its own democratically elected government on November 17th, 1971; the Executive Council of the coup instigators had given its sanction to the Ministry of Transport's negotiation with Northrop

⁴⁷ The Daily News, 8 January 1974.

⁴⁸ The author heard of the memorable saying from an interview with Manich Suksumchit, a senior journalist of the Thai Rath newspaper on October 22nd, 2008, at the Thai Rath headquarters on Vibhavadee Rangsit Raod, 8.30 a.m. -9.30 a.m.; currently, he is a member of the National Economic and Social Advisory Council.

Company that culminated in the signing of the first construction contract and the company's winning the concession of managing the airport after the construction completion on February 1st, 1973. Controversially, there were no feasibility studies, no master plans, no international bidding, or profitability studies on the part of the government. To settle the ensuing dispute, Mr. Burapa Atthakor, the Secretary to the Deputy Minister of Transport at that time, explained to all parties concerned in written statements that Northrop would carry out all the aforesaid studies⁴⁹, which turned out to be rather unjustifiable because Northrop also had a considerable share of interest in the project. Such unscrupulous practices had engendered much opposition from the student movements in later periods.

Nevertheless, the construction project was again interrupted by the political unrest on October 14th, 1973, which had ended the over sixteen years of the military rule. Due to the political repercussions, the project came under great pressure from the student, the academic movements as well as the mass media and Northrop Company was forced to withdraw from the project in the midst of January, 1974⁵⁰ during the Sanya Thammasak Administration.

In conclusion, the new airport construction project had developed to the largest extent within this period since the first construction contract had been signed; besides, a systematic survey of the Nong Ngu Hao area, which was the construction site, had been completed; still, the overall progression was the result of lucrative collusion among the junta, the bureaucracy and the private companies.

Summary

The political process in the construction of Suvarnnabhumi Airport began with the military government (under Field Marshal Sarit Dhanarajata)'s strong intention to participate in and harvest benefits from the airport building via the bureaucratic connivance and assistance; all the reasons employed by the government to justify the airport construction were merely a consequence of research distortion. The military governments (under Field Marshal Sarit Dhanarajata and Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn) also exploited intimate relationships between themselves and businessmen to procure mutual material gains from the development project, leaving the other social sectors, or political actors stranded on the political margins. The predominant role of the military in the political process is corroborated by the studies of the Thai political process (from 1957 to 1973) by Chaiananda Smutwanich, Suchit Bunbongkarn, Noranit Setthabutr, Saneh Chamarik, etc.

49 Burapa Atthakor, *Northrop Project: Criticisms and Related Facts*, (Bangkok: Odian Store), 1974.

50 Governmental Document No. SR. 0203/626, The Secretariat of the Cabinet, Subject: The Airport Construction at Nong Ngu Hao, on 15 January 1974.

III. The Thai Political Process in the Construction of Suvarnnabhumi Airport: The Policy Change Period (1974 - 1990)

This part will describe the political process in the construction of Suvarnnabhumi Airport during the time in which other political agents, the democratically elected politicians in particular, began assuming more political leverage after October 14th, 1973, and exerting more influence on the realization of the construction project.

In spite of an increase in the political influence of the other political actors, this part will illustrate the important role of the military in the Thai political process through the results of the author's study which show that the military could maintain its political role throughout this period and had finally managed to change the politicians' construction policy of the new airport; as a matter of fact, there is a discrepancy between the results of the author's study in this part and those of the studies conducted during the second age (1974-1990), in which the role of the military was accorded far less emphasis. Therefore, it is hoped that the author's analysis of the political process in connection with the Suvarnnabhumi Airport construction might help the past political perspective of this period to become more watertight. The details are as follows:

After the 14 October 1973 Incident the structure of the state power in the country had altered: The political stage once dominated by the military as the leading public policy maker was to be shared by other social sectors, most especially the politicians.

Even though the military were no longer the controller of the executive power and the government as in the early period, the existence of their political influence could not be denied (especially, their influence on the formulation of the state policy relating to the construction of the new airport in Nong Ngu Hao). For one reason, the author finds that in the period following the direct military rule, the military role in directing the progression of the new airport continued to exist: The Armies during the Gen. Prem Tinsulanonda Administration did not want the government at the time (whose ministers came from various political parties) to interfere with the armies' benefits related to the construction of the new airport despite the fact that the important politicians at the time such as Pol.Gen. Praman Adireksan (Deputy Prime Minister during the Gen. Prem Administration from the Chart Thai Party), Adm. Amorn Sirikaya (Minister of Transport during the same administration from the same political party), Wg.Cdr. Tinnakorn Punkrawee, Deputy Minister of Transport during the same administration from the same political party), Mr. Chumpol Silpa-archa (Deputy Minister of Transport during the same administration from the same political party), etc. earnestly supported this project.

These politicians played a distinct role in propelling the project further. In 1981 the cabinet gave its approval to the Ministry of Transport's hiring a consulting firm

to survey the construction site and design the Nong Ngu Hao Airport with a budget of 60 million baht (3.2 million baht came from the annual budget of the Department of Civil Aviation; 15 million baht came from the 1982 budget of the Ministry of Transport whilst the rest came from the 1983 budget of the Ministry of Transport.)

However, the efforts of the ministers, who were elected politicians, did not prove to be very successful, for the military did not want the new ruling political group to have a share of immense benefit stemming from the construction project; moreover, the politicians' motives underlying their efforts were questionable. Consequently, the military's intervention in the political process kept recurring: For example, from ACM. Panieng Kantarat's point of view⁵¹, the military disapproved of the construction of the new airport because the piece of land that was the construction site was covered with thick layers of mud and slime, considered unsuitable for airport construction; the building of the airport in the area was like laying "concrete" on "jelly"⁵²; or the military permitted the Air Force to move part of its headquarters out of Don Muang Airport in order to allow further modifications and expansion of the old airport so as to thwart the construction of the new one; or the military announced their full support for Mr. Samuk Sunthoravej, a politician who objected to the new airport construction, to head the Ministry of Transport during the "Prem 3" Administration.⁵³

With respect to the author's study, the findings show that the two major causes of the military (under Gen. Prem)'s opposition to the building of the new airport were 1) The military did not want the politicians to interfere with or reap the benefits that might have accumulated if there had been the construction of the new airport; these benefits were reckoned to belong to the military as the Armies were the sole controller of the country's civil/commercial aviation throughout the history of the Thai aviation. 2) The military, particularly the Air Force, during this period obtained a tremendous amount of benefit and monetary reward from Don Muang Airport. Don Muang Airport was like the Air Force's "rice field" (or "source of sustenance"⁵⁴); as a result, loss of civil aviation at Don Muang Airport in company with the construction of the new airport would unavoidably affect the military's gains.

51 ACM. Panieng Kantarat was the Commander in Chief of the Thai Royal Air Force from 1977 to 1981.

52 The Matichon, 2 May 1978

53 It was widely known at the time that Mr. Samak Sundaravej, the Prachakorn Thai Party leader, was given full support by the Armies both in his political campaign and participation in the "Prem" coalition government in 1986; the reason for the military's political move was the fact that Mr. Samak used to play a key role in protecting the armies after the 6 October 1976 Incident, which sent the image of the armies hurtling down to the nadir. See more details of the relationships between Mr. Samak and the armies in the Siam Rath special coverage, on May 17th, 1983.

54 An interview with Pojana Simasathien, at his house on Sathorn Road, on September 23rd, 2008, c. 10.00 a.m. – 02.40 p.m.

Summary

During the second age even if the politicians had become more influential in shaping the Thai political process but the military's role and influence on the determination of the construction of the new airport were tenaciously maintained, simply not by means of giving direct instructions as before. For this very reason, the politicians' attempts to propel the Nong Ngu Hao Airport development project over the period of seventeen year (1974–1990) were of no avail; although these politicians tried to fight forwards and succeeded in reaching a cabinet decision which approved the hiring of a consulting firm to design and construct the new airport, at the end their efforts became futile and impracticable because of strong opposition from the military and the armies. So the results of the study along with the governmental policy turned out to be merely “pieces of paper” not to be realized in actuality by the governmental agencies concerned. The military's consent remained a significant determinant of the state decision-making process; thus, without the consent, the construction of the new airport during this period had to be accordingly cancelled.

On the other hand, the studies of the Thai political process during this age (1973–1988) discussed previously, such as the works of Anek Laothamathas, Narong Petprasert, Patcharee Siroros, Montri Chenvidyakarn, etc., put far less stress on the military's role; most of the weight was attached to the roles of other social sectors, especially the private sector, business groups, and trade associations. Such a standpoint and political descriptions markedly differ from those of the author which testify to the role and pervasive influence of the military on the Thai policy formulation process—they were exercised in a different manner, however. The military interventions, according to the author's study, were in the shape of manipulation of relevant information, provision of interviewing sessions to the mass media, obstruction of the new airport construction, or provision of political support for pro-military political groups to secure protection of their organization and benefits.

It is hoped that the differing results of the author's analysis of the political process in question might help us to better comprehend the overall picture of the Thai political process.

IV. The Thai Political Process in the Construction of Suvarnnabhumi International Airport: The Approval and Initial Construction Period (1991 - 2000)

This part will expound on the political process during the time in which the politicians, political capitalists, and political campaigners/lobbyists had fully taken part in the country's political process; nonetheless, the author will arguably demonstrate that the military's great influence in the Thai political process remained evident and

unassailable as shown in the case of the military absolute control over all the decision making in connection with the construction of the new airport after the 1991 coup d'etat staged by the National Peace Keeping Council (NPKC) or in the case of the Armed Forces' repressive/antagonistic responses to the succeeding politician-led government's initiatives related to the new airport policy or its political interventions that engendered conflicts of interest.

Still, the study of the political process via the Suvarnabhumi Airport construction during this period may not correspond with the past research into the Thai political process during the third age (1991-2001) since the past studies placed much less emphasis on the role of the military in Thai politics, particularly after the May 1992 Political Uprising, and gave the roles of political capitalists and lobbyists more serious treatment, which sharply contrasts with the results of the study of the Suvarnabhumi Airport policy-making process during this period whose details are as follows:

In 1991 the structure of the state power of Thailand shifted again when the political force of the military and the bureaucracy reunited once again through the February 1991 coup executed by the National Peace Keeping Council (NPKC). This usurpation of power enabled a system of military dictatorship and a bureaucratic polity to share the same political orbit again and to work together to further mobilize the airport construction project via the Anand Punyarachun government. The Anand government had endorsed the construction of the new airport at Nong Ngu Hao by issuing the (Third) historic cabinet decision to officially permit the construction (the first cabinet decision was reached under Field Marshal Sarit's rule whereas the second was reached under Field Marshal Thanom's rule).

It was said that the approval of the project under the NPKC's rule (which was the time when the military could exert direct control over the government) was a by-product of the over-seventeen-year concerted efforts of the bureaucracy and the politicians that were ultimately suppressed by the military opposition; but when the military returned to power in 1991, the time was ripe for the determination of the state policy on the airport construction, much to the bureaucracy's satisfaction. In the past the bureaucracy had striven in vain to propel the project forward, relying on the democratically-elected government; eventually, its aspiration was fulfilled.

The chief reason for the military's reversing their policy under the NPKC's rule or during the time of military dominance of the Thai political process was that under such conditions the military did not have to share the amassed benefits brought about by the new airport building or the decision-making power concerning the formulation of the Thai aviation policies with politicians or other social sectors, unlike the Gen. Prem Administration— in that period the construction of the new airport would have induced the military to allocate part of their benefits and decision-making power to

the politicians and the members of other social sectors who constituted the majority of the cabinet.

The cabinet decision that gave the seal of approval to the construction of the second Bangkok airport at Nong Ngu Hao in 1991⁵⁵ was thus the product of the political process whose essence did not differ from that of the political process in the construction of the new airport from 1960 to 1973 at all inasmuch as the military's and the bureaucracy's prominent roles and influence continued to persist over time, mediated or compromised by the two institutions' mutual interests—despite the glaring fact that there were many studies of the Thai political process during the period attempting to say that the military's and the bureaucracy's roles had been considerably reduced.

After the Black May Incident in 1992 the role of the military seemed to recede/fade away from the Thai political scene, but as for the new airport construction policy the author finds that the military's role in determining the Nong Ngu Hao Airport construction policy remained unscathed and that their political interventions or exercise of leverage in the project's policy development were carried out through the governmental organization directly responsible for the project, which was "the Airport of Thailand" (AOT).

Considering the directors of the Airport of Thailand since 1979, the year of the agency's foundation, eight out of twelve directors came from the Thai Royal Air Force; especially during the first twelve years, the Air Force assigned the task of overseeing the Airport of Thailand to seven generals consecutively: Namely, AM. Sawai Choangsuvanich, AM. Bandit Susilavorn, ACM. Sombun Rahong, ACM. Thavorn Koedsin, ACM. Chanin Chantharubeksa, ACM. Nipon Sakornyen, and ACM. Terdsak Satcharak. Additionally, after the 2006 coup d'état, the Armed Forces had sent an Air Force officer of high rank, AM. Chana Usathaporn, to head this agency once again.

Such a discriminatory practice was not confined to the appointment of directors of the Airport of Thailand alone; even the selection of members of the AOT board of directors was rather lopsided because a number of qualified candidates were from the Air Force personnel. In some periods/ political ages the Armed Forces' officers simultaneously served as the AOT Director and Chairman of its executive board.

In addition to the Airport of Thailand, the New Bangkok International Airport Public Company Ltd. (or NBIA), which was set up according to the cabinet decision on May 16th, 1995, to be in charge of the second Bangkok International Airport development project⁵⁶, also invited the Armies' representatives to chair or serve on its

55 See more details in governmental document No. NR. 0202/7565, the Secretariat of the Cabinet, Subject: The Second New Bangkok International Airport Project, on May 14th, 1991, in accordance with the 7 May 1991 cabinet decision.

56 See further details in Official Document No. NR. 0206/5083, the Secretariat of the Cabinet, Subject:

boards of directors during various ages: For instance, ACM. Prachum Chaisiri or Gen. Mongkol Umpornpisit used to be the Chairman/President of the NBIA board of directors.

Another exquisite example which illustrated the military's influence over the supervision of the second airport construction policy was the power struggle between "the Royal Air Force" and "the politicians from the Kij Sang Kom Party" in 1995. In this political duel, Mr. Somsak Thepsutin, Deputy Minister of Transport from the aforesaid party, who supervised the Airport of Thailand, tried to promote his political proponent to directorship of the AOT at the expense of the incumbent director who held a senior rank in the Air Force and attempted to dismiss ACM. Amorn Naewmalee, a joint staff, from his post of the AOT executive director in tandem; the duel was considered the most obvious and most violent contention between the armies and the politicians in the period.

A former Air Force officer whose name cannot be revealed comments on the politicians' interventions in 1995 during an interview with the author: "I regard such actions as irresponsible because the minister did not have the authority to dismiss members of the executive board. Dismissal was warranted only in case of resignation, death, venal behavior, incompetent performance or absence from the meetings for three consecutive times. The incident was considered unjustifiable for the Air Force officers affected"⁵⁷. On the other hand, Mr. Somsak Thepsutin told the mass media during a press conference that "In this age, the Airport of Thailand does not have to depend on the military anymore, for the scope of responsibility has been clearly delimited."⁵⁸

Nevertheless, the conflicts were resolved in the Air Force's favor, for it could withstand and counteract the politicians' interventions by forcing the cabinet to withdraw the Deputy Minister of Transport's command (ACM. Amorn Naewmalee's dismissal)⁵⁹ and appoint ACM. Chanin Chantharubeksa as the new director of the AOT.

Summary

In conclusion, from 1992 to 2000 the exercise of the military's influence in the Thai political process swung from direct and open politicking to covert intervention via the bureaucracy, which enabled the military to retain their political sway to so great an extent that the politicians could not easily intrude upon their affairs. In the case of the Suvarnabhumi Airport construction, the military's assigning their men the

The Fiscal Plan and the Agency in charge of the Second Bangkok International Airport Project, 18 May 1995, in accordance with 16 May 1995 Cabinet Decision.

⁵⁷ An interview at the former Air Force officer's house on Paholyothin Road, on October 21st, 2008, c. 9.00 a.m.-12.30 a.m.

⁵⁸ The Matichon, 30 November 1995.

⁵⁹ Afterwards, ACM. Amorn Naewmalee was appointed as Air Force Commander-in-Chief (1996-1997).

task of presiding over the Airport of Thailand (AOT) and their sending their staff to sit on the New Bangkok International Airport Company (NBIA)'s executive board proved to be a fine testimony to their existing political leverage.

Despite their concealed political strength, the role and influence of the military during this age seemed to become more susceptible to challenge from the politicians, as shown in the heated dispute between the politicians and the armed forces. In order to stem the spreading contention between the two factions, Mr. Banharn Silpa-acha had to step in and act as a mediator between the beleaguered armed forces and the minister in charge of the new airport construction. As expected, the military won at the end.

Contradictorily, the former studies of the Thai political process at that time, i.e. Rangsan Thanapornpan's, Anek Laothamathas's, etc. showed more interest in the roles of the politicians, the political capitalists, or the lobbyists than the role of the military, which might not agree with the study of the political process in the Suvarnabhumi Airport construction as discussed previously; however, one thing which the former and the latter studies have in common is that the military became far more exposed to the politicians' opposition and challenge during this age than the preceding ages, i.e. since 1957.

As a result, the study of the political process in the construction of Suvarnabhumi Airport during the time can favorably help us to take a different view of the country's political phenomenon.

V. The Thai Political Process in the Suvarnabhumi International Airport Construction: The Subsequent Construction and Official Opening Period (2001 - 2007)

This part will present/exhibit the role of the military in the Thai political process during the period when the Thai Rak Thai Party assumed monopolistic control of the country by showing how the military played their role in the political process in the age of politicians with an iron will. It can be said that during this age the military were infiltrated and impinged upon politically as well as financially by the politicians to a largest extent in respect of the construction of the new airport—if it is compared to the extent of similar political interventions from the politicians having occurred since the conception of the new airport development project. Furthermore, this part will inquire into the role of the military after the 19 September 2006 coup d'état to reveal how the military manipulated the political process in the Suvarnabhumi Airport construction.

It is believed that the investigation of the role of the military in the political process during this age will render us a vantage point from which we can better see

all the multi-facets of the reflected picture of the entire political process of Thailand as the past studies of the same subject matter during this age did not attach much importance to the role of the military in the political process.

The role of the military in the political process in the construction of Suvarnabhumi Airport seemed to decrease conspicuously when the Thai Rak Thai Party came to power in 2001. The democratically elected government under the Thai Rak Thai Party became the key figure in mobilizing the Suvarnabhumi Airport construction project in place of the military. Pol.Lt.Col.Dr. Thaksin Shinawatra and his Thai Rak Thai Party proceeded with the new airport construction plan with remarkable speed amidst "scandalous rumors" unfolding the stories of allegedly dishonest manipulations involved in the bidding for construction/installation/operation contracts on various parts of the airport, such as the passenger terminals, the baggage conveyance system, the explosive detecting system, the electricity system, the electricity generating system, the runways, the taxi-lanes, the shops in the duty-free zone within the passenger buildings, etc.

In fact, the role of the military had changed from powerful policy makers, exerting their influence directly on the lower social echelons (as from the age of Field Marshal Sarit down to the age of the NPKC) or indirectly (after the Black May to 2000), to mere patients and the affected. Immense amounts of benefits arising from the airport project were symbiotically shared out among a large group of politicians and their capitalist associates who used the bureaucracy as an instrument. The role of the armies in the political process and policy development that had persisted over the decades was completely curtailed by the government; what's more, the armed forces' annual rounds of transference and promotion of military officers were likewise interfered with, which gradually kindled discontent among the military throughout the Thaksin and Thai Rak Thai Party's Administration.

Nonetheless, the role of the military in administering the building of the new airport had not been totally suppressed, yet, subject to a political compromise, the military had to condescend to act with the politicians' consent. For instance, Pol.Lt.Col.Dr. Thaksin Shinawatra gave sanction to the appointment of Gen. Chaivanant Charoensiri as Deputy Minister of Transport whose duty was to expedite the Suvarnabhumi Airport construction in order that the new international airport could be officially opened as scheduled.

But after Gen. Chaivanant Charoensiri had taken office for a short while, conflicts between the Thai Rak Thai government and Gen. Chaivanant erupted, for Gen. Chaivanant found that there were several things untoward in relation to the Suvarnabhumi Airport construction, most especially the issue of the government's aiding the Thai Airport Ground Services Company (TAGS) with its procurement of the

rights to manage the duty-free zone and to take out a lease of six-hundred-thousand-square-meter area so as to build a logistics center, including the parking space at Suvarnabhumi Airport, for ten years without due competition from other companies.⁶⁰

The construction of Suvarnabhumi Airport progressed step by step until the Thai Rak Thai government set a date—September 28th, 2006—for the airport's official opening ceremony. With a turn of events, Pol.Lt.Col.Dr. Thaksin did not have a chance to preside over the ceremony because Gen. Sonthi Bunyaratgalin, the Thai Army Commander-in-Chief, staged a coup d'etat on September 19th, 2006, thereby ushering in another age of direct military rule. The coup execution was carried out just nine days before the official opening; it emphatically put an end to the six years of the dwarfish political role and influence for the military.

The military's return to power had made them capable of directly formulating the Suvarnabhumi Airport management policy and consolidating their political role to an absolutist degree—considered to be one of the peaks of the military's political role since 1960. A large number of military officers were appointed to the agencies relating to Suvarnabhumi Airport's policies: ACM. Chalit Pukphasuk, the Air Force Commander-in-Chief and the first Deputy Leader of the Council for Democratic Reform under Constitutional Monarchy (CDRM) was appointed as Chairman of Thai Airways International Public Company Ltd., and Chairman of the Committee overseeing the official opening of Suvarnabhumi Airport on September 28th, 2006; under the Gen. Surayudh Chulanont Administration, Adm. Theera Haocharoen, former Navy Commander-in-Chief, was appointed as Minister of Transport; Gen. Saprang Kalayanamitr, Assistant Secretary of the Council for National Security (CNS) and an Army Assistant Commander-in-Chief, was appointed as Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Airport of Thailand Public Company Ltd.; Adm. Bannavit Kengrien, Deputy Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Defense, was appointed as Advisor of the Chairman of the Board of Directors of the AOT Public Company Ltd. and Member of Parliament who was responsible for the examination of the alleged corruption at Suvarnabhumi Airport.

According to an interview with a senior official involved in the new airport construction project, one of the underlying reasons behind the 28 September 2006 coup d'etat was the Suvarnabhumi Airport development project—practically, the military would like to resume their role and influence in the political process in connection with the project like the past decades. The facts concerning the aforesaid issue were later proven and confirmed by the CDRM's attempts to investigate scandalous prac-

⁶⁰ See more details in the Airport of Thailand Public Company Ltd.'s board of directors' minutes on December 18th, 2005.

tices at the airport; it had set up the Asset Examination Committee (AEC) to probe into the allegations of the Thai Rak Thai government's corruption. The committee handpicked at least three corruption cases: Namely, the purchase/maintenance of the baggage conveyor belts, the CTX explosive detection x-ray baggage scanning devices; the hiring of (a)companies to lay the underground electricity lines in Suvarnabhumi Airport; and the Airport Rail Link project.⁶¹

Moreover, the Gen. Surayudh government and the National Assembly (appointed by the CDRM) had launched the investigations into several suspected cases, such as the distressed runways and taxi-lanes of Suvarnabhumi Airport (the surface deformation occurred just a few months after the official opening) or the duty-free zones in the passenger terminals whose contract award seemed to be given in favor of some private operators.

Summary

Although the role of the military in the Thai political process had plummeted to the lowest point during the Golden Age of the Thai Rak Thai Party, the military managed to preserve a small slice of their previous political power under the politicians' close scrutiny and control. Political pressure from the politicians brought to bear on the military that stemmed from losses of benefits related to the construction of Suvarnabhumi Airport, in particular, turned out to be one of the major causes of the military seizure of power in 2006. After overthrowing the Thai Rak Thai government, the military, again, reclaimed their role as the sole policy maker of the Suvarnabhumi Airport, which effectively drew a long period of their political downturn since 1991 to a close.

On the part of the research on the Thai political process during the time (before the 2006 coup d'etat) that were conducted by the academics like Pasuk Phongpaichit, Rangsan Thanapornpan, Kasien Thechapeera, Kasem Sirisumpandh, Terayuth Boonmee, etc., to which the author had previously referred and provided a brief overview, their works gave a great deal of saliency to just few groups of politicians and their capitalist supporters and belittled the role of the military in the Thai political process to the degree that the military's reclamation of their direct control over Thai politics by means of the 2006 coup d'etat was regarded as something totally unexpected.

Conclusions

With reference to the question posed in the introduction: What was/ is the military's role in the Thai political process and the Thai state policy formulation?, the

61 Prasong Lertrattanawisut (ed.), *Judicialization: The Revolution in Thai Politics*, (Bangkok: Matichon), 2008.

findings of the study of the Suvarnabhumi Airport construction project that uses the development project as a representative microcosm from which the overall picture of Thai politics can be derived, show that the military had remained politically influential, both directly and indirectly, in shaping the Thai political process involved in the construction of Suvarnabhumi Airport, and politically versatile throughout the following periods (1960-2006) regardless of whether the military exerted their power on stage in full view of the general public or not.

The validity of the findings mentioned above was based on the long historical records of the military's contributions towards the Suvarnabhumi Airport development project as seen during the military government of Field Marshal Sarit who initiated the new civilian airport construction project despite the fact that the results of the town planning study indicated that such a project was recommended for the distant future, or under the military administration of Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn who played a leading role in the expropriation and purchase of nearly twenty thousand rais of farmland and swamp and also served as a driving force behind the U.S. Northrop Company's winning the new airport construction concession that would enable the company to secure a monopoly on all commercial services at the airport for twenty years, or during the Gen. Prem Tinsulanonda's rule in which the armies played a key role in opposing the construction of the new airport under the control of the government dominated by politicians (not the military) and suppressing the politicians' pending efforts, or under the government formed by the NPKC which issued a historic cabinet decision to give the new airport construction project the long-awaited seal of approval after being shelved for several decades, or under the later administration in which the military, subject to a political compromise between themselves and the ruling politicians, strove to investigate the construction of the new airport in the prime of Thai Rak Thai Party's political life, or under the latest coup's government which rearranged the structure of the state power and then took charge of the new airport's official opening ceremony.

The 2006 coup d'etat, the opening of Suvarnabhumi Airport, the re-examination of the unscrupulous practices in the airport construction further testify to the predominance of the military's role and influence in the Thai political process over the past five decades; their role could be modified to suit the prevailing temporal, social and political conditions of each age, and so could their exercise of power; it could be direct or indirect. This is an answer to the article's question about the role of the military in the Thai political process and the Thai public policy-making process.

All the assembled incidents and events can exquisitely illustrate the enduring role as well as influence of the military: Even if the military might disappear from the country's political stage in certain periods, their role and influence in the Thai political

process were well preserved and could be exercised at will in diverse manners depending on the social context and the times as shown in prior explanations.

The study of the Thai political process and the Thai policy formulation process via the construction of Suvarnabhumi Airport is capable of assisting us in discerning the fact that **in Thai politics the role and influence of the military in the political process and the related decision-making process deserve more prominence than accorded in the results of the former studies of the Thai political process during the four ages, which portrayed their gradual decline since 1973.**

However, the author does not mean that the roles of other social sectors, i.e. politicians, businessmen, political campaigners, non-governmental organizations, the mass media, and the general public, did not figure in the Thai political process. As a matter of fact, the author finds that the roles of other social sectors have significantly increased step by step. An increase in their political roles has caused the military interventions to take indirect/unobtrusive forms and to exploit other means to efficiently exert their influence over the policy-making process of the mega-projects that directly affect the military's interests, such as the Suvarnabhumi Airport development project.

Therefore, the author's study is another form of academic endeavor undertaken to fill in the gaps extant in the studies of the military's role and influence in Thai politics. This form of research (much underrated by a large number of academicians) places great stress on the military's role and influence in the political process in connection with policy determination in addition to the military's direct political role in the form of the orchestration of coups d'etat, which has proven to be the subject of interest of the political studies for many decades.